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ABSTRACT

Using the file approach in freshman composition gives students experience with the selection and utilization of a range of sources for writing, the awareness of writing as a learning activity that is by nature a process, and the opportunity to write and read across the curriculum. In this approach students are expected to keep a file of information, ideas, and possible topics for compositions collected from magazines, newspapers, or their own experiences. Students receive a peer evaluation sheet and worksheets designed for organizing file information. Students are encouraged to develop the file based on areas of vocational or avocational interest, since students' interest and achievement tend to improve if they perceive the class and assignments as being of individual importance. This focus also enables students to experience writing as a process of gaining knowledge about a topic. In addition, the conferences and peer evaluation components of the file approach allow students to learn how diverse people think and feel about a topic of importance to the writer, and about its development in an essay. Finally, the file approach reveals the process nature of writing. (Appendixes contain a worksheet for organizing file information, and a peer evaluation sheet.) (EL)

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Using the File Approach in Freshman Composition

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Using the File Approach in Freshman Composition

The research done into the composing process in recent years repeatedly stresses the importance of viewing the writing process as just that, a process encompassing pre-writing and developing ideas through extensive rewriting. This research also presents writing as a multidimensional activity involving interaction with other individuals, whether in a conference setting, a group-writing project, or within a writing-across-the-curriculum approach. What challenges the writing instructor, however, is the question of what methodology or methodologies will enable us to utilize these findings. What will work for our classes which are often becoming increasingly heterogeneous in terms of student experiences, motivation, ability, and career aspirations? The file approach is a method that has worked well for me over the last four years. After explaining how the file approach is presented and implemented in my Freshman writing classes, I will discuss its observable benefits.

Westmoreland County Community College requires that every student regardless of major take College Writing. As a result, any given College Writing class is diverse and heterogeneous. The assigned writings in my classes include several paragraphs, two expository essays, and two argumentative essays. The second expository and argumentative essays use topics, ideas, and materials generated by the file, a Required Activity described in the Student Outline as follows:

Keep a file. This file will contain information, ideas, and possible topics for papers. You may collect information which is of personal or career interest to you from other classes, from textbooks, from magazines or newspapers, or from your own understanding and experiences. In any event, this information should be periodically summarized by you and organized into possible paper topics. Conferences with the instructor will isolate writing assignments of interest to you that grow out of this file. Alphabetically file this information by category. The file must also contain practice writings. You are encouraged to write several times a week in your file. This writing can be in the form of a diary, a journal or practice paragraphs or essays that deal with any topic of your choice. The more you write, the better your writing will become.

The first two weeks of the semester cover the rudiments of mechanics and paragraph structure and present additional information about the file. Students receive

the Worksheet for Organizing File Information with accompanying Answer Sheet (Appendix A) and the Peer Evaluation Sheet, including criteria and working copies (Appendix B). As you will notice, the Worksheet basically requires the student to organize material and to move from generalized to specific ideas, the same movement implicit in paragraph and essay development. I tell the students that items five through seven will undoubtedly change in successive drafts of the paper; for now, they should concentrate on arriving at and developing ideas. We then discuss pre-writing, emphasizing that the file is the place to collect all such work. The self and peer-evaluation sheets constitute an important component of each student's workload because they must be completed for all four essays, not just the file-generated essays. So when discussing these sheets, I urge the class to work with a cooperative spirit, as they indeed will have to do when their careers begin, and to be as detailed as possible with suggestions. Prior to the student-professor conference to discuss the draft of the second expository essay, the files are checked to note the level of the student's generation and accumulation of ideas, including the range of sources used. Students then complete the file process by finishing the worksheet, writing a draft, having it evaluated by peers and the individual writer, and finally by attending the formal conference. Students understand that additional conferences may occur during my office hours or by appointment, as often as necessary.

The file process initially appears cumbersome and confusing to many students, but such an appearance quickly disappears when they begin to see what it can do. The file approach develops the range of sources used for writing, demonstrates the process nature of writing, and encourages writing-across-the-curriculum.

As just mentioned, this approach develops the student's awareness of a wide range of sources of material for writing. The file approach encourages the exploration of individual experience, a source overlooked by some students, as well as a variety of secondary sources (i.e. newspapers, magazines, texts, television), and the use of other people including expert faculty and students from the level^e of the expert to that of the merely interested. This breadth of potential sources provides the stu-

dent with individual flexibility. He/she has the opportunity to begin with personal experience, a stance many professors and beginning students prefer, but also to explore sources other than the self in the traditional individual response to an article or articles read in an assigned Reader. By helping to expand the file, the professor supports the student's exploration and use of a variety of sources. The student who employs such a range of sources comes to realize that the file approach also serves as an introduction to several of the skills needed in other writing courses such as Advanced Composition (Research Paper), Technical Communication, or Business Communication; these skills involve the use of disparate sources, footnoting, and the development of source materials.

Regardless of the sources used, I encourage the student to develop the file based upon areas of vocational or avocational interest. This focus has several advantages. First of all, a student's interest and achievement tend to improve if he/she perceives the class and the assignments as being of individual importance. Secondly, this focus enables the student to experience writing not just as a form of communicating knowledge but as a process of gaining knowledge about a topic; again, the student's initial interest in the topic vocationally or avocationally enhances the degree of learning. In addition, the conferences and peer-evaluation components of the file approach allow the student to learn how diverse people think and feel about a topic of importance to the writer and about its specific development in a specific essay. The student is thus invited to explore the ramifications and potentials of his/her ideas, to in other words think, learn, and communicate that learning to others both verbally and in writing. Writing thus becomes a means of communicating in the broad sense of the term. Writing within this method also can become a means of developing the self by developing one's knowledge in relation to the awareness of career goals and aspirations. Such awareness often clarifies and justifies the student's college experience, resulting in better performance in many classes.

Expanding the use of sources and promoting learning are important goals and results within the file approach. Another major result is that this approach clearly

reveals the process nature of writing. The ideas found in the pre-writing exercises, done in the file before completing the Worksheet for Organizing File Information, can be compared to the ideas on the Worksheet and in the draft, thus giving a visual graph of the generation and permutations of an idea, a graph which enables the student to see the writing experience as one of process and becoming. Moreover, the peer evaluation sheets can be compared and discussed in terms of what weaknesses exist in a draft and what strategies can be adopted to eradicate them in subsequent drafts of the essay. Again, writing is seen as a process involving writing, rewriting, and more rewriting in subsequent drafts.¹ I always present this process as one rooted in the individual but containing a communal component and goal. By realizing that a final draft is produced only after previous drafts have developed^{out} of peer and professor involvement, the student senses the communal nature of the writing process. This group dimension is vital because on the job writing is frequently done by more than one person.²

As this process and the file approach continue, the student focuses on the skills of editing and proofreading. The assortment of evaluative perspectives, including peer, the professor, and finally the writer himself/herself, expands the writer's critical awareness by demonstrating how people of differing interests, writing strengths, and writing weaknesses can react to an essay. If three peer evaluators give a writer three different suggestions for improving a paragraph's style, he/she begins to see how editing involves selecting among many possibilities. Moreover, some students can clarify mechanical and stylistic points for other students better than we can; what is important, of course, is that the writer become a better editor and proof-reader. This goal can also be achieved by giving the writer an opportunity to serve as peer evaluator for other students' papers because this experience often produces a more critical reader of one's own work.

As we have seen, the file approach provides flexibility in terms of developing sources for writing and utilizing the process concept of writing. The file also lends flexibility to a writing-across-the-curriculum approach. The file can easily be

adapted to a joint writing evaluation whereby the English professor reacts to the drafts and final papers on the basis of structure, style, and mechanics and a faculty member expert in the specific topic area of the papers reacts to them in terms of content. Another possibility is to have the writer contact a faculty expert during the file development and draft writing stages of the process, again enhancing his/her learning and appreciation of writing as a learning experience and not just a process of putting often hastily conceived or untested ideas in a prescribed format. In both cases, writing crosses heretofore clearly defined and maintained distinctions among departments, programs, and courses. This sense of interconnectedness can also be achieved by cultivating the infinite range of possible topics implicit in the file approach. The computer science major who perceives basic similarities between COBOL and the English language can be encouraged to fully investigate this topic. Student interests and ideas are thus seen as fit material for writing, and again traditional disciplinary boundaries disappear. Michael Holzman, in "Articulating Composition" (College English, 45 [March 1983], 288-295), perceives linking writing with general education courses or majors courses as an important step in decompartmentalizing writing and enabling it to be seen as a complex task of thinking, learning, reading, and writing. The file approach can foster this perception.

Writing-across-the-curriculum, though important, may not be as important as what might be called "reading-across-the-curriculum." DonnaLee Rubin, in "Evaluating Freshman Writers: What Do Students Really Learn?" states that "Bridging the gap between the two [the ability to read and the ability to write] should be one of our primary concerns as writing teachers" (College English, 44 [April 1983], 374). The file approach can help realize this concern. As stated above, this method invites the student to explore a range of sources for ideas, including sources of reading that cross departmental boundaries. Given this scope of reading, and given the professor's ability to question and to elicit secondary support for student claims during the conferences, bridging the gap between curricula and between reading and writing abilities can occur. During the conference, the professor has immediate access to the student

selected reading sources. Any discrepancy between the student's understanding of a passage and its full meaning becomes quickly noticeable and surprisingly meaningful. For example, a rather disgruntled welding major recently wrote an expository draft on why welding is a poor career choice. He liked his welding program and he had wanted to study welding for several years, but he was now apprehensive about his choice. I discovered in one of our informal conferences during office hours that the focus of his topic grew out of the "disappointing" job statistics contained in an article he had read in a trade journal. When our interaction revealed that the tone of the journal's argumentative article was ironic, the student once again envisioned a promising college experience and future career as a welder. The gap between reading and writing in this instance was meaningfully eradicated; the importance of a career decision, and not rhetorical concerns alone, enabled this student to read a bit more carefully during the remainder of the semester. I do not present the file approach as a panacea for improving reading ability nor do I assume that other methods of teaching writing cannot bridge this gap.³ But the student's interest, the individual attention available to him/her, and the conversational communication within the file approach are definite advantages in achieving such a goal.

The file approach lets me utilize many of the best findings of recent research. In the four years that I have used this approach, it has helped motivate and develop students with diverse backgrounds, abilities, and career interests. This method also enables me to give students experience with the selection and utilization of a range of sources for writing, the awareness of writing as a learning activity that is by nature a process, and the opportunity to write and read across-the-curriculum. Student reaction to this flexible approach has been positive, and student performance in second level courses, whether Technical Communication, Business Communication, or Advanced Composition, has also been good. From my perspective as well as that of the student, this last fact is most significant.

FOOTNOTES

¹ An excellent source of ideas on revising is a collection of essays edited by Ronald Sudol entitled Revising: New Essays for Teachers of Writing (ERIC, 1982).

² Lester Faigley and Thomas Miller, "What We Learn from Writing on the Job," College English, 44 (October 1982), 561.

³ See Charles Bazerman's article "A Relationship Between Reading and Writing: The Conversational Model" in College English, 41 (February 1980), 656-661.

APPENDIX A

English 161
Dr. DeBacco

Worksheet for Organizing File Information

- Place the information in your file into as many general categories as needed (i.e. welding, nursing, accounting). List these categories on the answer sheet.
 - Identify the general categories more specifically (i.e. welding jobs, nursing requirements, accounting's impact on business). List these narrowed categories on the answer sheet.
 - Identify the above categories more specifically (i.e. welding jobs in this county, changing requirements for an A.A. degree in nursing, accounting's impact on small businesses). List these categories on the answer sheet.
 - Repeat the above process until you have 2 or 3 workable thesis statements (i.e. welding jobs in this county are increasing for several reasons). Choose which thesis you wish to develop into an essay. Then complete steps 5 through 8.
 - After summarizing the data that relates to your thesis, construct as many topic sentences as you need (i.e. One reason for this increase is due to Volkswagen coming to New Stanton. One reason for this increase is a shift in manufacturing toward heavy industry).
 - Write transition sentences that will connect the paragraphs you anticipated above (The second reason why welding jobs are increasing....; In addition to the above reason, jobs are more plentiful because....).
 - Organize your material into a clear outline which includes your thesis statement, your topic sentences, and supporting data.
 - Write a rough draft. Include the following annotations:
 - underline the thesis statement once;
 - underline the topic sentences twice;
 - put transition sentences in parentheses;
 - identify in the margin each developmental strategy that you use;
 - indicate where footnotes will be needed
- You are expected to bring a completed worksheet and a rough draft to the scheduled conferences.

ANSWER SHEET

English 161
Dr. DeBacco

- General categories:
- Specific Categories:
- Narrowed categories:
- Thesis statement(s):
- Topic sentences:
- Transitions:
- Outline:

APPENDIX B

College Writing
Dr. DeBacco

Peer Evaluation Sheet

In addition to the conferences with the instructor, you must also have each of your four rough drafts evaluated by at least three other students in the class. When you are not in conference, you are to meet with other members of the class to evaluate your writing. You must submit at least four completed evaluation sheets with each essay you submit to the instructor. One evaluation sheet must be completed by you. Use the following criteria in your evaluation:

- Introduction
 - Introduction with background data, statement of relevance, and thesis statement.
 - Thesis is clear, direct, and adequate in terms of the type of essay assigned and the length of the paper
- Development Section
 - The body of the paper consistently focuses on the stated thesis and only the stated thesis
 - The thesis statement is concretely and specifically developed. Examples, evidence, and facts are present
 - The thesis is developed logically and coherently
 - The argumentative essay has advantages, disadvantages, and invalidations
 - Each paragraph has a clear topic sentence as well as paragraph unity and coherence
 - Transitions occur between paragraphs and are clear and complete
 - Appropriate use of developmental strategies.
- Summary
 - Restates major points
 - No new data is introduced
 - "Call to Arms" for argumentative essay
- Style
 - Diction is appropriate
 - Variety in sentence structures
 - Transitions to avoid choppy phrasing
 - Phrasing is direct, simple, and clear
- Format
 - Follows format in student outline
 - Annotation is complete
 - No contractions
 - No first person pronouns
- Mechanics
 - Fragments, run-ons, and comma splices
 - Punctuation
 - Spelling

Peer Evaluation Sheet

College Writing
Dr. DeBacco

Author's Name _____ Code: _____
 Type of essay _____ S - strong
 Title _____ A - adequate
 Evaluator's name _____ M - Weak
 Code _____ Suggestions _____

- A
- B
- C
- D
- E
- F
- G
- A
- B
- C
- D
- A
- B
- C
- D
- A
- B
- C

Overall rating _____
 Additional suggestions _____

END

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